

Speaking of Abuse

The Pyramid of Reporting Domestic Violence in India

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In India, most women who experience domestic violence do not share their experience with anybody or seek help. Among those who do, a “pyramid of reporting” exists. Informal sources (natal family and friends) are favoured; very few report violence via institutional routes (non-governmental organisations and police). The conditions under which incidents of domestic violence are reported, and/or help is sought through different routes—along with the reasons why such conditions often do not occur—are highlighted using large-scale secondary survey data and primary ethnographic data. The findings have implications for mitigating domestic violence through institutional routes.

Domestic violence has serious economic, social, and health consequences not only for women but also for children and the wider family. It is an acute problem in India; one in three women reports physical abuse at some point in her life.¹ Domestic violence is an offence; it can be tried under either criminal law (Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1983) or civil law (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005).² Despite legal provisions, and the mainstreaming of discourse around gender-based violence following recent brutal rapes, however, violence against women is on the rise (Simister and Mehta 2010), and there appears to be no concomitant changes in the processes by which families, institutions, and the wider society recognise and proactively respond to violence against women.

How domestic violence is addressed is a barometer of the country’s commitment to gender equity. But to address such violence, it would, of course, need to be reported, and the challenge starts right from that most elementary of steps—reporting is far from frequent. India lacks mandatory reporting mechanisms such as routine screening, and reporting by hospitals when women visit with suspicious injuries associated with domestic violence.

Due to deeply entrenched patriarchal practices within legal institutions, domestic violence is often treated as a private family matter (Ghosh 2015; Chattopadhyay 2017). Such has been the recent patriarchal backlash from some sections of the judiciary that some high courts have instructed the police not to file complaints unless “visible signs of abuse are present” (Reddi 2012), and men’s rights groups and organisations such as Save Indian Family Foundation have called to repeal or rescind parts of Section 498(A) of the IPC (Basu 2016).

Not only is reporting the first step towards ending the silence around domestic violence, it can also be construed as an act of resistance and an exertion of female agency (Kethineni et al 2016). Reporting carries risks, with responses ranging from a lack of acceptance by families, to humiliation by the police, to retaliatory escalation of violence.³ The extent and type of support—familial, social, and institutional, including practical assistance and dealing with emotional impacts—influences coping with and recovery from trauma (Rose and Campbell 2000). The responses of family, friends, and neighbours can also influence the decision to report domestic violence to institutional sources. And—of particular relevance for policy—reporting is suggestive of institutional facilitation to visibilise domestic violence (Agnes 1992).

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It is important to distinguish between help-seeking, reporting, and sharing of information. In the health sciences literature, help-seeking is conceptualised as planned, problem-focused, deliberate behaviour, involving interpersonal interaction, with a clear goal (Cornally and McCarthy 2011). In contrast, reporting—especially through informal routes such as friends or family—while deliberate, may not have a clear goal; it may be unplanned and circumstantial. Sharing of information is even less deliberate or planned; women may let information slip to empathetic friends or family members. The lines between reporting to informal sources and sharing of information as well as letting information slip are blurred.

This article systematically explores the contours of domestic violence sharing and reporting using data from Round 3 of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) and ethnographic data from an informal settlement (“slum”) in Mumbai. The article problematises the reporting of domestic violence; includes different types of informal and formal reporting (family and friends versus formal authorities, including the police); and constructs a “pyramid of reporting.” A clear pyramid of reporting emerges from the quantitative data. Since the data set is large-scale and representative, it sketches a composite picture for the country. The narrower ethnographic accounts reinforce and nuance this finding, and explore conditions and pathways through which sharing, reporting, and help-seeking occur.

The article also explores the contours of non-reporting. The NFHS-3 data show that of all women who have experienced domestic violence, as many as 74% have never shared this or reported it to anybody—a figure that is high in both absolute and relative terms. This article is the first systematic attempt to study reporting (and non-reporting) of domestic violence in India. The reporting of domestic violence is understudied even in the literature outside India, as is the exploration of the factors that facilitate reporting (Garcia-Moreno et al 2005; Palermo et al 2014), in contrast with the vast literature on the risk factors for domestic violence. It is worth noting that there are several sources of data on domestic violence, but these are disparate, and need to be systematised (UN 2013).

The Pyramid of Reporting

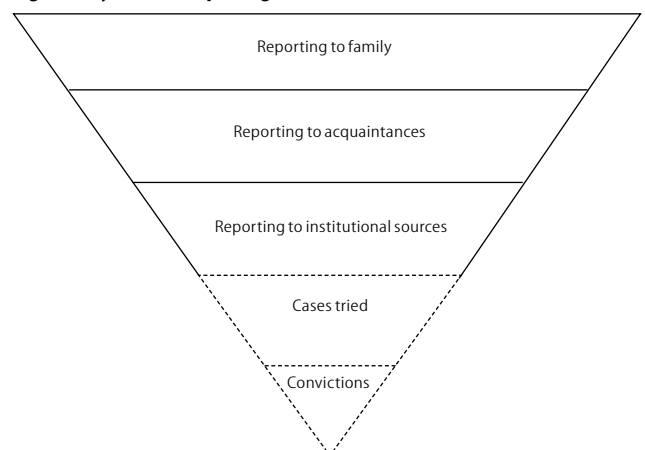
Domestic violence is rarely communicated; when it is, family and friends—rather than formal institutions—are the likeliest points of communication. In the nine-country International Violence Against Women Survey (IWAWS) from the United Nations (UN) and Statistics Canada (Johnson et al 2008), on average 54% of respondents reported violence to their families, 39% to friends/neighbours, 17% to social or community-based institutions, and 12% to the police. Broadly, similar results emerge from a 10-country survey of domestic violence by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Garcia-Moreno et al 2005); on average, 13% of women subjected to physical domestic violence sought help from at least one agency due to encouragement by friends or family (Garcia-Moreno et al 2005, p 191, Appendix Table 18). Across 14 cases, this ranged from 5% (rural Tanzania) to 33% (urban Namibia).

Women prefer to seek help first from parents and health-care providers (Mahapatro et al 2014; Gupta 2014; Chattopadhyaya 2018). Even when formal routes, such as courts and counselling centres, are involved, mitigation of domestic violence occurs using a similar cultural grammar that privileges kinship ties and expects aggrieved women to reconcile rather than separate or divorce (Vatuk 2013; Kowalski 2016). In a clinic-based study of young mothers from an informal settlement in Mumbai, Decker et al (2013) find low awareness of formal sources of help; instead, experiences of domestic violence are mostly shared through informal routes, particularly the natal family. They also find that social humiliation and fear of further abuse are important reasons for not disclosing domestic violence, especially to friends or neighbours, although women are willing to reveal this information in a healthcare setting. Neighbours are willing to help women who experience domestic violence only if they consider her a “worthy” victim (Ghosh 2011). In a study of low-income women in Delhi, Snell-Rood (2015) finds that the nature of support from neighbours ranges from providing temporary refuge, to directly intervening when they witness violence, to providing emotional support and advice.

Based on the literature, a “pyramid” is constructed to represent revelations of domestic violence. Before an incident enters the legal system, the family is the first point of contact, and the police the last (for related work, see Rose and Campbell 2000). Figure 1 distinguishes reporting to family from reporting to acquaintances or to institutional sources (including the police). Typically, “family” consists of natal family members (parents and siblings), but can also include in-laws. “Acquaintances” can include friends, neighbours, community members and others (for instance, individuals at the workplace or from voluntary groups). Like family and acquaintances, relevant “institutional sources” are also context-specific—besides the police, these can include, for instance, mahila mandals (women’s organisations) in the context of Mumbai’s informal settlements.

The construction of a pyramid of reporting does not imply that there is a strict sequential chain in reporting. Rather, it is argued that the likelihood of reporting to each successive lower

Figure 1: Pyramid of Reporting and Conviction



tier of the pyramid is more if reporting occurred for an upper tier.⁴ Beyond reporting to the police, the pyramid tapers because only a fraction of police reports produces legal charges and only a fraction of these ends in convictions (Figure 1).⁵

Strikingly, across countries, on average 37% of respondents in the IVAWS and 28% in the WHO survey had spoken to no one—family, friends, or institutional sources—about being subjected to domestic violence. Just as strikingly, even in the case of the route used most frequently (the wider family), on average only about half the respondents did so. Why are reporting rates so low?

The literature notes a familiar set of reasons: low self-esteem, mistrust of others, fear of humiliation, perception of limited options and hopelessness, and intimidation by the abuser (Rose and Campbell 2000). Institutional reporting is constrained by an even greater set of reasons: the norm of not discussing family problems with outsiders, weak/inaccessible institutional support, lack of awareness of legal rights, and fears of biases and humiliation from patriarchal institutions.

The literature on India identifies a cluster of constraints to reporting, including “cultural” factors that suggest that women prefer dealing with the problem within the family itself, thereby retaining familial honour and reducing stress on others (Kamat et al 2013; Kapadia-Kundu et al 2007; Krishnan et al 2012; Snell-Rood 2015; Tichy et al 2009). Intriguingly, conventional measures of “empowerment” do not seem to increase it (Rowan et al 2015).

Given the presence of strong patriarchal norms, even when family members—especially those in the natal family—are told about violence, the instinct is often to normalise it and ask women to endure it and adjust to it (Chowdhry 2012; Jejeebhoy 1998; Kanagaratnam et al 2012). It is rarer still to seek help of institutions. The institutions of law and order are viewed with suspicion (Chandrasekaran 2013; Panchanadeswaran and Koverola 2005), and there is hesitation even in approaching healthcare providers regarding injuries from domestic violence (Chibber et al 2011; Kamimura et al 2014; Krishnan et al 2012).

Secondary Data and Analysis

Data from the NFHS-3 are used to sketch a national picture of reporting through different routes (IPS and Macro International 2007). A sizeable number of respondents—31%, a little over 20,000 women—reported to surveyors that they experienced domestic violence, and were asked about “help-seeking” behaviour. The specific question asked was: “Thinking about what you yourself have experienced among the different things we have been talking about, have you ever tried to seek help to stop the person(s) from doing this to you again?” Women answering in the affirmative were further asked: “From whom have you sought help to stop this?”⁶ (IPS and Macro International 2007, Vol II, Appendix F, p 131).

Table 1 (Columns 2 and 3) presents, for women who reported domestic violence, the averages for four broad sources they sought help from—the natal family, husband’s family, acquaintances, and formal institutions such as the police.⁷ Shockingly, for the 21,207 women who told surveyors they had experienced

domestic violence, almost 75% did not seek help from any of these sources. The natal family is most frequently contacted for help—it is more than double the second most frequent category—but even this is true for less than 19% of women facing domestic violence. This is followed by the husband’s family (about 9%), acquaintances (about 6%), and formal authorities (about 1%). In the case of the police, it is only about 0.5%, and yet this is higher than the other authorities listed in the NFHS data (religious leaders, social service organisations, and lawyers). Put together, the numbers for informal and formal routes presented in Column (2) of Table 1 are consistent with the pyramid of reporting (Figure 1).

In Table 1, Column (3) shows frequency of contacting different sources in instances of severe domestic violence (for definitions, see IPS and Macro International 2007). Expectedly, frequencies are higher than in Column (2)—multiples of 1.7 (natal family), 1.6 (husband’s family), 2 (acquaintances), and 2.5 (authorities)—but they still conform to the pyramidal relationship. When there is severe domestic violence, the incidence of reporting to the police is 2.6 times greater than when domestic violence is present but not severe. But it should be noted that in absolute terms only 1.48% of women experiencing severe domestic violence go to the police. Even among women experiencing severe domestic violence, most (56.7%) do not seek help from any source.

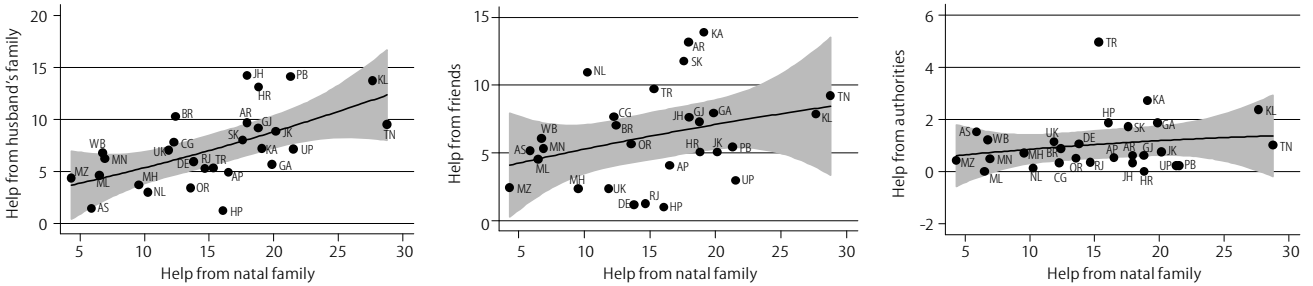
Table 2a (p 56) shows the frequency of help-seeking from different combinations of the four broad sources (natal family, husband’s family, acquaintances, and authorities). For the approximately 26% of women experiencing domestic violence who do seek some form of help, Table 2a shows that a little over half seek it only from their natal families. The extent to which women seek more than one source of help is quite limited. Of all women experiencing domestic violence, 26% seek help, and 7% seek help from multiple sources, with the natal family figuring prominently in these cases as well. To illustrate this point

Table 1: Help-seeking from Different Sources (%)

Domestic Violence Reporting Route	NFHS-3	NFHS-3	Ethnography
	Some Violence	Severe Violence	Physical/ Emotional Abuse
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Natal family	18.55	31.37	76% (N=26)
Husband’s family	8.51	13.51	59% (N=20)
Acquaintance (neighbour, friend, Other person)	6.10	12.15	32% (N=11)
Neighbour	4.20	8.62	
Friend	2.25	4.25	
Other person	0.29	0.67	0%
Authorities (police, religious leader, social service organisation, lawyer)	1.04	2.59	3% (N=1)
Police	0.58	1.48	3% (N=1)
Religious leader	0.28	0.68	0%
Social service organisation	0.18	0.43	0%
Lawyer	0.18	0.46	0%
None	73.63	56.70	

Sample size for NFHS-3 (Column 2) was 21,207. Columns (2) and (3) pertain to women who experienced some violence and severe violence, respectively (for definitions, see IPS and Macro International 2007). Sample size for the ethnography was 52; 28 reported either physical and/or emotional abuse, with the majority reporting physical violence and four reporting only emotional abuse. Of the 28 who reported domestic violence, two had not shared the experience with their natal families.

Figure 2: Help from Different Sources across States, Conditional on Violence



more fully, Table 2b estimates pairwise conditional frequencies—that is, for two sources *x* and *y*, the frequency of seeking help from *x* conditional on seeking help from *y*. Help from the natal family is sought in over 40% of cases where another source of help is sought. The corresponding numbers are smaller in the cases of the husband’s family and of acquaintances, and far smaller in the case of formal authorities.

Overall, Tables 2a and 2b reinforce the presence of the pyramid of reporting presented in Figure 1. However, the presence of such a pyramid based on aggregates does not, of course, imply sequential reporting in individual instances. For example, Table 2b shows that in 48.83% of instances when authorities were contacted for help, the natal family was also contacted, implying that in a slight majority of instances (51.17%), women who contacted the police did not seek help from their natal families.

Table 2c presents pairwise correlations between help-seeking across the four sources. The correlations for natal family,

husband’s family, and acquaintances are in the range of 0.17–0.21, but the correlations with institutional help-seeking are far lower, in the range of 0.05–0.12. This suggests that there is clustering among non-institutional sources (albeit far from perfect), and that seeking help from family and acquaintances is a poor predictor of institutional help-seeking.

This finding is reinforced by Figure 2, which presents scatter plots for India’s states for help-seeking from natal family against the other three sources (each sub-figure also shows the line of best fit and the 95% confidence interval). Figure 2 shows a positive and statistically significant relationship between help-seeking from the natal family and husband’s family; a weaker positive relationship (but not statistically significant at conventional levels) between help-seeking from the natal family and acquaintances; and complete absence of relationship between help-seeking from the natal family and authorities. The estimated coefficients (*p*-values) are, respectively, 0.34 (0.003), 0.16 (0.15), and 0.02 (0.50).

Table 2a: Help from Four Sources—Combinations of Sources

No of Sources	Sources	Percentage
1	Only natal family	12.94
	Only husband’s family	4.10
	Only acquaintances	2.37
	Only authorities	0.33
2	Natal and husband’s families	2.54
	Natal family and acquaintances	1.73
	Natal family and authorities	0.23
	Husband’s family and acquaintances	0.82
	Husband’s family and authorities	0.03
	Acquaintances and authorities	0.14
	3	Natal family, husband’s family, and acquaintances
Natal family, husband’s family, and authorities		0.10
Natal family, acquaintances, and authorities		0.11
Husband’s family, acquaintances, and authorities		0.03
4	All	0.06

Table 2b: Help from Four Sources—Conditional Frequencies (%)

Help from ↓	Conditional on Help From			
	Natal Family	Husband’s Family	Acquaintances	Authorities
Natal family		41.57	44.89	48.83
Husband’s family	19.06		28.67	21.20
Acquaintances	14.76	20.56		33.21
Authorities	2.75	2.60	5.68	

Table 2c: Help from Four Sources—Pair-wise Correlations

	Natal Family	Husband’s Family	Acquaintances
Husband’s family	0.21***		
Acquaintances	0.18***	0.17***	
Authorities	0.09***	0.05***	0.12***

Sample size for NFHS-3 was 21,207.

Understanding Contours of Reporting—Ethnographic Insights

Quantitative data sets such as the NFHS-3 cannot provide a nuanced understanding of revelations around domestic violence, or of the absence of such revelations, or of associated processes and contextual influences. This article turns to previously unexplored ethnographic data collected during a year-long fieldwork (2005–06) by one of the authors (Chattopadhyay) from an urban informal settlement in one of the most deprived wards of north-eastern Mumbai (Ward M).

There were 1,400 households, split into four housing societies; each society had 200–500 households. Snowball sampling was used to initially visit 80 households, from which 52 women agreed to participate in the study. Strict ethical protocols were followed, and written or oral informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were kept securely and original names and identifying information have been removed here.⁸ The ethnography yielded vignettes pertaining to help-seeking, reporting, and sharing of information, although its focus was on structural violence and the political economy of domestic violence. Field notes and interviews were analysed using the constant comparative methods of induction and iteration and a grounded theory approach (Fram 2013; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Although the majority of women interviewed (28 of 52) were physically and emotionally abused, only one reported to the police. Typically, domestic violence was first reported to

the victim's natal family (Table 1, Column 4). Twenty of the 28 women who experienced domestic violence had reported it to their husband's family, but only two received support; only one reported her husband to the police, although even in that instance, it was an informal complaint (implying that legal processes were not initiated). Women overwhelmingly justified most forms of domestic violence—viewing it as a tool for disciplining errant wives—and contributed to under-reporting to institutional sources.

The ethnographic data (Table 1, Column 4) are similar in their pyramidal structure to NFHS-3 data (Columns 2 and 3). However, the difference is the gradient of the pyramid, suggesting that contextual and in-depth collection of data through ethnographic methods often leads to a higher rate of revelations around domestic violence than possible through surveys. Out of the 28 women, 26 had shared their domestic violence experience with someone else, a figure that is much higher than found in NFHS-3.

Ethnographic analysis generates several insights pertaining to domestic violence reporting. First, and unsurprisingly, the natal family often tends to be the first port of call, so that its presence and support encourages women to report severe domestic violence to formal sources. If the natal family is absent, the consequent reduction of underlying material, moral, and emotional support tends to deter women from reporting domestic violence to formal sources. However, the presence of the natal family is not a sufficient condition for formal reporting. Even when women report violence to natal families, entrenched patriarchal norms—on matters such as the importance of marriage, the symbolic importance of husbands, and social penalties for separation—along with persistent poverty and structural violence circumscribe the extent of support they receive.

The ethnographic analysis also reveals several barriers to institutional reporting, including (well-founded) mistrust of formal authorities, particularly the police. Civil society organisations (CSOs) such as women's organisations may help in mitigating violence and providing access to formal authorities, but those in Ward M had party and ideological affiliations that produced a perception that they were not objective; many women, especially from minority religious groups, preferred not to involve such organisations. Community-based support was often contingent on perceived “worthiness” of the victim, since some forms of violence are culturally legitimised in the guise of disciplining errant wives.

Reporting to Informal Sources

This section explores the informal sources used by victims to report domestic violence.

Absence of natal family as a deterrent against reporting to others: The natal family is an important resource in sharing one's experience of domestic violence. Further, as the vignette below for Preeti, who was in her late 40s, indicates, it could be an important pathway to other forms of reporting. Thus, the absence of the natal family could discourage reporting.

Preeti had endured severe domestic violence, including bruises and cuts, and years of emotional abuse. She did not have the support of her immediate natal family, because both her parents had died by the time she married; and her only sibling, a sister, was also in an abusive relationship. The little natal family support she received was from a maternal aunt. Preeti had an inter-religious marriage, and had limited support from her in-laws.

Respondent (R): You see that large brass pot there, it has become flat because he beat me with it. I used to have black marks all over my body.

Interviewer (I): Did you go to the doctor then?

R: No, I did not. You know why? Because I do not have any *sahara* (support), no mother, no father. How many years will my *mausi* (maternal aunt) support me? I thought of all this and tolerated it.

Natal family as a pathway for institutional reporting: Rita, in her early 30s, had three children. Her husband moved to Mumbai and abandoned her. Rita had recently migrated from Odisha. Her current partner was a male relative who was supporting her and her toddler son. In her case, the parents and brothers were an important source of support. She described an instance when her family supported her after her husband had spent all their money on alcohol and she and her children had nothing to eat.

R: My parents and my two elder brothers would not let me go. They thought: “She is the youngest daughter, somehow we will feed her and take care of her. If need be we will also feed her husband.” My brothers used to fight with him—once they beat him and there was blood coming out of his nose ... in the hope that he would improve.

Finally, when her husband took away their child, Rita's mother accompanied her to the police station.

R: I had bought [jewellery] for the ears, the neck, the hand. He stole all of them and sold it off and ate it all. He took my baby and ran away to his mother's house. So I took my mother and went to their [husband's] village. I knew if I go back to the village he will beat me. Other people gave me courage so I filed a report in the police station. The police then went to their [in-laws'] house in their jeep. They caught him and brought him to the police station. I told them [the police] not to beat him up, [but] just to scare him a little bit.

This narrative indicates that the intervention of the natal family—not just at the point of filing a police complaint, but also prior to that—had created conditions that facilitated and, finally, led to reporting to the police. The period leading up to police reporting was marked by extreme physical violence—he had broken her collar bone, dragged her by the hair on several occasions, and she had to be hospitalised for a head injury and severe bleeding.

Limitations of sharing informally: The ethnographic data suggest that the degree to which the natal family is willing or able to provide help varies greatly. It is contingent on factors such as poverty, hold of patriarchal norms, cultural legitimisation of violence, and structure of the natal family. These factors may discourage women from sharing their experience of domestic violence even with the natal family.

Many women said that they did not think their families would be able to bear their “burden,” especially because

typically they had children, and therefore they did not share their experience with their family. In situations where the natal family itself leads a precarious material and social existence, this is a pragmatic assessment.

Note the following conversation with Sabiha, a 35-year-old widowed mother of three children who worked as a domestic help. Her husband had died four years earlier from liver disease due to prolonged alcohol abuse. When drunk, he would often beat her and throw her out of the house with the children. Sabiha's parents were poor, her father was an alcoholic and her younger brother (who stayed with her parents) had an unstable job and moods, and was often violent towards their mother. The conversation below highlights what would typically occur if she went to her mother's place when her husband threw her and the children out of the house.

I: You would be out the whole night?

R: Yes, that has happened, and if I went to my mother's place my mother would tell me: "What is wrong with you people? You are quiet during the day but start making a ruckus at night."

[pause]

R: I would not go because my mother would say that you all are "fine by day and at night you disturb our sleep." So instead of being reprimanded time and again I preferred to bear the pain myself. Then I would take my children and sit outside. I knew if he [husband] fought with me, he would throw us out of the house, so I would catch hold of a rug or a bedsheet beforehand so that we can spend the night outside. He used to harass me a lot after drinking.

While it is disconcerting that the natal family is unsupportive, it is unsurprising given the larger contextual and systemic issues. The pattern of violence ensured that if her husband were to throw Sabiha and the children out of the house, she was ready with a blanket, prepared to spend the night in the alleys of the settlement. This is how domestic violence, embedded within a continuum of structural violence, is normalised. It is amplified by the loss of the safety net of one's family, due mostly to the toxic and long-term effects of poverty.

Institutional reporting: India's poor have a difficult relationship with the police. Often, they are at the receiving end of the state's development policies. Their homes and property are destroyed, but they are not adequately compensated (Bayley 2015). Instances of custodial rape have developed in many women a grave mistrust of the police, thus amplifying multiple barriers to institutional reporting including (Gangoli 2011).

Barriers to institutional reporting: Uma, 25, had an inter-caste marriage. Her husband was an alcoholic. Uma had experienced domestic violence on occasion. When asked whether she thought it may be a good idea for women experiencing domestic violence to involve formal authorities, Uma was categorical in her refusal. The narrative below is a reflection of how the appeasement of the husband becomes a central concern in tackling domestic violence for many women. Relatedly, it also points to the perceived futility of reporting to formal sources.

R: I think police, lawyers, and divorce are all bad ...

I: You think these are all bad ideas?

R: Yes I do, I think one should go home and explain things to him [the husband] after his anger cools down a little. If you go with anger the fire will flare up (*aag bhadkegi*). Till his anger cools down, we should wait. Then slowly we should talk. This is how I think. He is angry and I go somewhere to tell someone—that is not good. You should not go to your parent's place (*maika*) in anger. I will go and then return within two days. We should sit down and wait till his head cools down (*dimag thanda hone tak*) and then after he cools down we should go and try to explain to them.

A study by Ragavan et al (2015) in Udaipur finds similar views echoed by both men and women. They categorically rejected formal sources of help and recommended, instead, that victims endure abuse, adjust to the situation, make the perpetrator understand, return to the natal family when the abuse becomes unbearable, remarry (in the case of specific castes), or even commit suicide (a minority view).

The study found that participants were extremely reluctant to involve the police. The participants felt that the police were unreliable, and would not work unless bribed, and that seeking police intervention would tarnish their reputation in the community. The majority of women were financially dependent on their husbands and did not view divorce as a viable option. Although there were non-governmental organisations working in Ward M, few women were aware of any that could help abused women.

It is only in very rare circumstances that abuse is reported to the police. Consider the case of Rita, introduced earlier, in the following:

I: Did you ever have to go to hospitals because of his beatings?

R: Yes, I did, many times. Sometimes he would hit me badly on my back. Sometimes my bones would get displaced because of the beatings (*haddi khisak jata tha*). Before he left me all these things were broken (points to her collar bones and her arms and hands). Not even one bangle would stay on my hand. He would break everything and hit me. He would catch me by the hair and bang my head against the wall. Then he would hit me on the road also. He would catch hold of my hair like this [shows how he twisted her hair around his hands] and then drag me through the village like that.

Despite a history of extreme physical violence, Rita did not file a police report against her husband. She involved the police on the one occasion (described previously) only when he took away their child, a situation where emotional duress and her mother's support led her to break the usual barriers against reporting incidents of domestic violence to the police, but there was no involvement beyond that instance. It appears that the denial of access to her children, not the intensity of violence, was the catalyst for formal reporting.⁹

It is unsurprising that for many women the severity of violence may not be a good predictor for reporting to the police. See below for perceptions of the state and the police described by Meera, Rita's neighbour.

Meera: We think [the] police and doctor[s] are our gods. We think that the police will keep us safe, just like our brothers stand behind us for our security ... like that the police will be. But the police is a real asshole (*ek number ka chutiya*).

[Silence]

Meera: See what I am telling is right. I have not studied much but what I am telling is true.

Rita: No of course you are, the police are not good here.

Role of CSOs in formal reporting: Despite the presence of a mahila mandal in the settlement, many women were unaware of it. Mahila mandals often mediate in family disputes, hold soft skills classes for women and organise competitions to reward good housekeepers as well as mobilise women during elections.

Durga is a married Maratha woman; she had two adult children. Chronic alcohol abuse had damaged her husband's health. Durga worked intermittently at clerical jobs and used to volunteer for a mahila mandal. The household ran on her erratic income and the income of her adult son. Durga had reported two incidents of being slapped and shoved by her husband. However, what set her apart from the other women is that she actively resisted her husband.

R: She should not go to the police or her mother or her father or anyone else in the society. If she goes to the women's organisations then she can learn all the rules (*niyam*) [rights and entitlements], she will gain a lot by going there.

Durga felt it might be more prudent to go to a women's organisation, but many women reported that mahila mandals could be ineffectual because of corruption, right-wing ideologies leading to exclusionary policies of mahila mandals, and ineffective or overly authoritarian leadership. Durga had not asked the mahila mandal to intervene on her behalf, but she had learnt what her rights were from her interactions with them; as a result, she felt confident in resisting her husband.

On the possibilities of community involvement: Consider the case of Jigna, a 21-year-old Gujarati migrant with two young children and a very thin social network. She had moved to the informal settlement just a year earlier and had reported her husband's abusive behaviour to her only friend Reema, who like her was also from Gujarat and also experienced domestic violence.

A few days earlier, unable to bear the abuse, Jigna had told Reema that she was contemplating suicide. Reema told her to stop "all this nonsense about death and dying" and "to think of her two young sons." While Reema was not able to directly intervene to stop the violence, one evening she asked Chattopadhyay whether she knew about Jigna's "problem," using the English word as a shorthand for domestic violence, in the hope that Chattopadhyay will be able to help Jigna.

Note that despite being a young migrant, she reached out to the only female friend she had made in the community. Western literature suggests that structural violence in impoverished communities not only increases the likelihood of domestic violence but also reduces help-seeking and help received (Edwards et al 2014). Although such findings should be extrapolated carefully to India because of differences in both spatial and cultural configurations, it is indicative of the role of community.

Uma (introduced earlier) reflected on the role of neighbours in mitigating domestic violence by rescuing the woman from public physical domestic violence.

I: Do you think if the woman waits and then talks to her husband, he will usually understand?

R: If you put it like that, many husbands do not understand. But even then, I think that it is important to try to explain [our perspective] to them. (pause)

If he does not listen to me, then we can bring the neighbours to speak to him. You know why? Because if he comes to hit you, the other people will catch him (Laughs)

I: So they will save you?

R: Yes they will save us. It happens like that here.

I: Suppose a man is drunk and is hitting his wife. Who tries to counsel—his family or the neighbours?

R: The people in the neighbourhood try to counsel him. The family people, you know they always side with their son. The people around them (*aaju baaju ke log*), the women around the neighbourhood, only they understand the pain of the woman. They can tell from their own knowledge, "do not do this," "do that."

The spatial configurations of an urban informal settlement are such that a woman who is being physically abused publicly will be "rescued"—even if only temporarily—by her neighbours. This is not just because the community feels empathy for women, but also because violence of this nature is seen as a form of public nuisance and many families would prefer a peaceful neighbourhood (Ghosh 2011). Uma draws on the idea of a "universal sisterhood" by identifying the sources of support for women; it is not the family of her husband who will support her, but in fact other women in the informal settlement who are the only ones "who can understand the pain of the woman." This suggests that when facilitating informal help-seeking opportunities for women, such coalitions may have a very important role. However, neighbours are not always forthcoming with assistance and often it depends on a subjective and ad hoc assessment of whether the victim is truly "deserving" based on her role as a wife, mother, and neighbour (Ghosh 2011; Ragavan et al 2015).

Conclusions

This article explores the non-reporting of domestic violence as well as differential reporting across sources (family, acquaintances, and formal institutions). Reporting—even to close family and friends—is not very common for the vast majority of the approximately 20,000 women interviewed in NFHS-3 regarding help-seeking. Among those who do speak to someone about domestic violence and, possibly, seek help, NFHS-3 data are consistent with a pyramid of reporting. The natal family is contacted most often, and institutional sources contacted the least; legal action against perpetrators of domestic violence falls dismally farther behind the already low incidence of institutional reporting.

Some connections between reporting to informal sources and institutional reporting are explored and, in particular, how reporting to informal sources helps in reporting to institutions. However, there are limitations to informal reporting; in the contexts of structural violence, family and friends face great constraints in responding to a woman sharing her experience of domestic violence. This points to the need for strengthening institutional mechanisms for help-seeking.

Approaching the police and other formal agencies of governance may be forbidding for several women experiencing

domestic violence, a potential case can be made for the role of intermediary CSOs. For instance, in the vignette where police reporting occurred only under severe duress (the abusive husband abducted the child), it is conceivable that an inclusionary, community-based organisation may have mediated access to the police and institutional reporting well before the incident of extreme duress.

Two avenues of future research on reporting domestic violence seem evident. The first has to do with spousal attributes that impact help-seeking behaviour. Some important factors discussed in the extant literature are controlling behaviour on the part of the husband (Leone et al 2007) and agency (or lack thereof) on the part of the wife (Rowan et al 2015). The ways that these factors are connected to help-seeking need better theorisation. Relatedly, the connection between women's agency and controlling behaviour itself needs to be better understood in the context of help-seeking behaviour.

The second avenue for further research is regarding contextual factors and temporal dynamics of help-seeking behaviour. Several of the vignettes in this article attest to the importance of these. One way to begin to unpack context would be to explore pyramids of reporting for different regions. Figure 2 makes an implicit start by presenting state-level data on seeking help from different sources. There is considerable spatial variation of gender-related variables even at the district and sub-district levels (Jacob 2015), suggesting the importance of going beyond composite all-India constructions. This exploration of an informal settlement

context in a megacity needs to be extended to several other contexts.

For disadvantaged women, it may be more important to have strong community-based organisations that are inclusive and knowledgeable about women's rights and social entitlements—as one of our research participants, Durga, advises—to facilitate reporting and access help in situations of abuse. In fact, there are examples of programmes that have reduced intimate partner violence among sex workers in Karnataka by building coalitions of community-based organisations and supporting the formation of sex workers' unions (KHP 2015). The police are involved only in extreme cases, since incarceration of perpetrators is seldom a sustainable solution for this group of women.

A recent study by the Northeast Network found that over 64% of the 1,200 women in rural Assam who reported domestic violence over the two years of the study approached someone for help (NEN 2015). This is a much higher level of help-seeking than reported in most other studies for India, perhaps because in the NEN study women were recruited through small community-based organisations of rural women, which are more likely to come in contact with women seeking help for domestic violence. For a state like Assam, strengthening mahila samitis (local women's councils) and students' unions may help women experiencing domestic violence and thus different regional contexts may require different approaches to strengthening formal and informal sources for women to address domestic violence.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Round 3.
- 2 Marital rape is not criminalised in India; however, Section 498(A) of the Indian Penal Code includes provisions to criminalise specific instances of sexual violence. The maximum sentence under Section 498(A) is seven years' imprisonment. However, few cases are reported to the police, even fewer make it to the courts, and convictions are made in only a tiny fraction of those.
- 3 Of course, it cannot be denied that even in the absence of reporting and explicit female agency women do resist violence through many creative ways.
- 4 Reporting to institutional sources, and eventually to the police, is hardly indicative of institutional recognition of complaints of abuse. Johnson et al (2008: 145) refer to the "attrition in the criminal justice system ... from reporting to the police, investigating the case and laying a charge against a suspect, prosecuting an offender, arriving at a conviction and passing sentence." Based on a sample of 787 cases at the City Civil and Sessions Court in Mumbai, Chattopadhyay (2017) finds that just a little over 6% of cases under Section 498(A) obtained a conviction.
- 5 Institutional reporting is influenced by the type of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual); perception of severity of abuse; and perception whether abuse is a crime. Fugate et al (2005) suggest that victims have a threshold level/severity of violence beyond which they seek institutional reporting but, as Johnson et al (2008) and others note, this likely differs from one individual to another and also depends on contextual variables. For the literature on India,

see Bhate-Deosthali et al (2012), Chowdhry (2012); Gupta (2014); Jagori (2011); Ray et al (2012) and Sakhi (2011).

- 6 Not all women experiencing violence answered the "help-seeking" questions in NFHS-3, and some answered although they had not experienced violence. However, 92% of those seeking help also experienced physical violence, and 98% of those who experienced physical violence also answered the "help-seeking" questions. Altogether, there were 21,207 women who responded to the "help-seeking" questions and who had experienced physical violence.
- 7 The NFHS-3 has three other "seeking help" categories: from doctors or medical personnel; current or former boyfriend; and the husband. But such help was sought in, respectively, only 25, 10 and 60 instances, accounting for only, respectively, 0.0010%, 0.0003%, and 0.0021% of cases; so, these small numbers are ignored.
- 8 Since this was a community-based study and informants knew each other, special care was taken to not discuss what one participant had shared in confidence with the researcher. Fieldwork was conducted in Hindi and Marathi over a period of 13 months and translated into English by the researcher, retaining the nuances of the language particular to the Hindi/Marathi mix spoken by working-class women in Mumbai. A semi-structured questionnaire was used initially, but given the nature of anthropological fieldwork, conversations touched on a variety of themes and subjects that were valuable for contextualising marginality, domestic violence, and avenues for mitigation.
- 9 Despite the protestations of her natal family, she went back to his house after a few days. Police intervention did not end the violence.

After a few months, they migrated to Mumbai. Subsequently, he abandoned her for another woman.

- 10 Given that Assam has large sub-regions that are rural with low population density, the pyramid appears different: 38.4% sought help from their natal families; 17% from mahila samitis; 16.3% from village headmen, students' unions, and tribal organisations; and 11% from the police. The study also highlights the limited role of (male-dominated) panchayats, which focused on other matters such as livelihoods.

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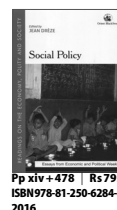
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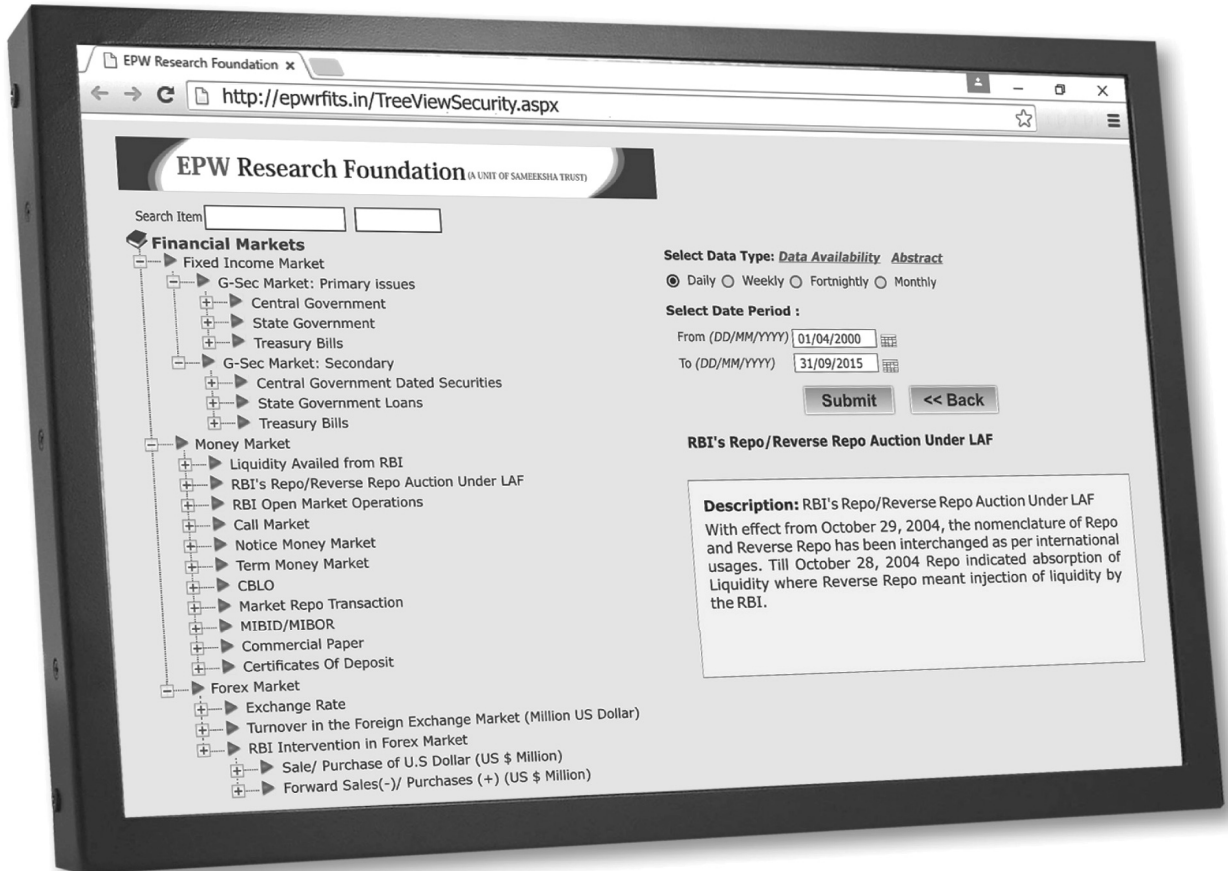


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